

The role of the coach in elite equestrian sport

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INTRODUCTION: Theoretic knowledge suggests that the role of the sports coach is to develop the physical, tactical, technical and psychological attributes of the athlete and is responsible for the planning, organisation and delivery of the training plan and competition schedule (Armour, 2010; Lyle, 2010; Becker, 2009; Werthner and Trudel, 2006). However, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that is the role required in equestrian sport as the rider takes responsibility for many of these tasks. Research in other sports also suggests that the coach-athlete relationship is one of closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation (3 + 1 C’s) and that this relationship is key to the success and development of the athlete.

AIM: This research aimed to address the void in current knowledge by gaining an understanding of coaching in equestrian sport in order to improve coaching education system through awareness of the role of the coach. Objectives were to examine the relationship between coach and rider at elite level in equestrian sport investigating whether the rider is, in part, ‘self –coached’ and to identify the elite equestrian coaches’ role in coaching these ‘self-coached riders.



METHOD: A sample of elite British team coaches (N=3) and elite senior British team riders (N=3) were interviewed. Analysis of the transcripts revealed a total of 534 meaning units, that were further grouped into sub-themes and general themes from the coaches’ perspective and the riders’ perspective. This led to the development of a final thematic structure revealing major dimensions that characterized coaching in elite equestrian sport in Britain.

1 st order themes	2 nd order themes	General theme	Categories
Rider Experience (2)	Rider plans training and competition programmes	Riders makes key training and competition decisions	Rider is a Self-Coached athlete
Rider's feel for the horse (2)			
Technical Knowledge (1)			
Analysis own performance (4)			
Training and performance based on trial and error (2)			
Selection of horse and Individual horse's experience (3)	Rider is responsible for horse care and well-being		
Sets goals (1)			
Knowledge of individual horse psychology (2)			
Managers horse care (4)	Limited contact with coach		
Liaise with support staff (3)			
Plans and organises transport (1)			
Formal session with a coach less than once per week (5)			
Visual 'eyes on the ground (4)	Develop independent decision makers	Analyst	
Analysis performance (7)		Facilitator	
Challenge riders (6)			
Freedom to experiment and allow riders to make mistakes (2)			
Problem solving (6)		Mentor	
Selects drills and exercises (7)			
Develop body awareness, feel, balance and rhythm (12)			
Advisor (5)			
Problem solver (6)			
Sound board for ideas (3)	Psychologist		Role of the coach
Provides a different prospective (3)			
Give confidence (7)			
Gives encouragement and reassurance (2)			
Helps maintain focus on goals (1)			
Knowledge and understanding of the psychology of the equine (2)	Professional		
Not close (2)			
Training less than once a week (8)			
Professional (5)			
Ridden at a high level (5)			
Experience of coaching at elite level (2)	Trust and respect	Professional relationship	Coach-Rider relationship
Performance record (2)			
Good communicator (6)	Communicator		
Can explain what they feel/should be feeling (1)			

Conclusion: It was found that the riders at the elite level coach themselves the majority of the time therefore can be considered as ‘self-coached’ athletes (Bradbury, 1999). However, they do use elite coaches in a mentoring and consultancy role, where they seek guidance from the coach on specific problems, to discuss ideas or to seek reassurance that what they are doing is correct. Findings from this research suggest that the rider-coach relationship at the elite level is a professional one based on trust and respect, but not a close relationship as seen in other sports (Jowett, 2000). The results show the imperative need for the British Equestrian Federation to educate coaches in the skills needed to coach the self-coached rider at the elite level, particularly in terms of mentoring skills. As well as incorporating rider education, aimed at developing the independent riders with the skills to coach themselves.